

A Community Yoga Therapy Program Focusing on Metabolic Conditions: How We Did It

By Gabriela Binello



For the last 4 years, at Proyectomadre in Buenos Aires, Argentina, we have been working in one-to-one consultations integrating the approaches of yoga therapy and ayurveda. Our ayurvedic physician, who is from south India, has been focusing on our students' health, and this aim has been enhanced by individual yoga practices under my supervision. One of the most relevant features of these cases has been symptoms related to metabolic issues: low digestion capacity, loss or lack of appetite, gas formation (lower-back pain due to gas formation), constipation, acidity, bloating, and high cholesterol, among others). This motivated us to create a program in which we could target these conditions on a larger scale.*

My school's yoga therapy program for our community was born from two key needs of those with metabolic conditions: dietary adjustments and lifestyle changes, both of which often require significant support. With this in mind and acknowledging that ultimately healing is an individual process, we wanted to invoke the special energy of the group experience. As a peer encounter that promotes the sharing of positive learning from a common altruistic source, our *sangha*

(yogic community) helps to inspire, support, and expand the personal transformation that our participants experience.

This type of experience has also been a vital part of the practicum for those in Proyectomadre's yoga therapy training program. While completing the final portions of the syllabus, we offered trainees the option of doing their internship hours as part of this community program within the framework of our school. They not only accepted the challenge but turned out to be active agents for the viability of the project.

I am sharing our story—and the details of how we built our program—in the hopes that more yoga therapists and yoga therapy schools will be inspired to undertake similarly impactful outreach in their own communities.

Nuts and Bolts

During the next 6 months, 10 teachers were divided into three groups in which they worked on the course planning of 14 weekly yoga therapy sessions oriented to metabolic issues. Within the scope of

these conditions we highlighted obesity, high cholesterol, high blood pressure, hypo- and hyperthyroidism, and type 2 diabetes.

Each class was divided into two sections. One section of 1 hour was dedicated to the asana and pranayama practice. The next hour was split into two: 30 minutes for group counseling and the other 30 minutes for one-to-one yoga practice supervision.



Apart from the sessions planning, the teachers also worked on a promotional plan for the program. Here, we developed communication skills to spread the word about our yoga therapy group classes oriented to metabolic conditions. We designed different templates for social media and a Q&A email with detailed information. We informed our community about this plan through social media, our monthly newsletter, and some printed fliers spread around the neighborhood. The program had a token cost for participants (about 2% of the cost of our regular classes).

We also developed registration forms. From these, we created individual files for each participant. We set up a workspace on Google Drive for the teachers to interact and receive supervision and feedback throughout the 9 months of the program. In each participant's file, the teachers noted the practice variations, evolution, comments, responses, and any other relevant observations that arose after each class. During the registration phase, the organization and implementation of all these data sources (application forms, participants' files, detailed information for transcription into case reports) were centralized and acted on by some of the regular teachers who work in the school.

Designing Course Elements

The objectives of the asana and pranayama practices were designed to follow the traditional course planning of *vinyasa krama* (step-by-step progression toward the aim), mainly drawn from the Krishnamacharya tradition. Among others things, this means

- establishing a long-term goal,
- setting the initial and mid-term goals, and
- designing the sub-goals toward the mid- and long-term aims.

Almost as a microcosm of the whole program, each session built toward the fulfillment of these objectives in a progressive, simple, and intelligent way. By "intelligent" we mean filled with care (following Yoga Sutras 2.30 and 2.32) and respecting the traditional teachings of engaging each step by way of the four pillars of transformation from the gross to the subtle, in accordance with Yoga Sutra 1.17.

Participants completed a registration form in which, among other relevant information, they described their main symptoms. Based on that, the asana and pranayama goals targeted two main ranges of symptoms. One group of sessions worked with symptoms like slow or incomplete digestion, heaviness, bloating, low energy, sedentary lifestyle, constipation, water retention, lack of motivation, sensitivity to cold, lack of concentration, and procrastination (as noted by the doctors who teach in our training programs to be mainly associated with obesity, hypothyroidism, and some symptoms of type 2 diabetes). The other group of sessions covered symptoms like excessive hunger, excessive and disrupted energy level, acidity, diarrhea, anxiety, heart palpitations, insomnia, sensitivity to heat, irritability (mainly associated with high blood pressure, hyperthyroidism, and other symptoms of type 2 diabetes).

With these major symptoms in mind, asana, *mudra* (as a tool targeting deep cleansing on subtle levels), pranayama, *nyasa* (placement of attention on certain body parts), and mantra were carefully selected and purposed to

- strengthen the *agni* (digestive fire);
- improve and support elimination;
- reduce mind agitation and develop balance and calm;
- encourage better rest and sleep;
- improve circulation and restore energy levels;
- promote awareness, compassion, and acceptance; and
- bring lightness to the body and to the whole being.

The counseling section of the classes was designed to bring awareness to *ahara-vihara* (food habits and lifestyle). Each session had a specific subject oriented to positively affecting *ahara-vihara*, the main ones being

- cycles of day and night, phases of light and darkness, and their relationship with *agni* strength;
- formation of *ama* (undigested stuff/toxins in the system) that challenges *agni*;
- phases of life and their relationship with *agni* strength;
- importance of regular yoga practice to build positive *samskara* (deeply ingrained habits);
- acknowledgment of the importance of cleansing and nurturing the senses and the mind through new and positive *samskara*;
- observing and giving space for the *vegas* (natural urges);
- favoring appropriate sleeping habits;
- including suitable physical exercise;
- taking care of one's inner strength through the expansion of *shradda* (confidence in and devotion to transformation); and
- recognizing the importance of that inner connection to support health.



These themes worked as triggers for weekly exercises that were shared with the sangha. For example, to address cycles of day and night and the impact these have on agni’s strength, we asked participants to have dinner near the time of sunset. Or, to facilitate personal practice, we suggested waking up 20 minutes earlier than they usually would and practicing before breakfast. Or to encourage mindfulness of the nutrition of all senses, we asked them to observe all the levels of violence on their screens and then refrain from exposing themselves to such influences. Each week they had some time and space to review how the “homework” went and, at the same time, to experience the support of the teachers and the group.

From the second week onward, all students had their own personal routines. This routine was planned one-to-one by a designated teacher who received supervision every 2 weeks. The personal practice carried on the mentioned metabolic aims and tailored the tools appropriately for each student’s needs and possibilities. Therefore, together with the weekly class and the counseling homework, the personal practice was intended to deepen the student’s inner connection and willpower.

Completing the Program and Feedback

We accepted the total quota of 30 participants and placed them in three groups, two groups in the morning and one in the afternoon. We took special care to end classes at an appropriate time for them to follow their new routines (morning practice, early dinner, etc.). After 14 weeks, 23 of the students had completed the whole program, with very few absences. Four participants left after the third week when they could not develop commitment to the personal practice. Three other participants left for personal reasons.

The weekly feedback registered changes that had to do with their awareness and their improving digestion; they said that the program also helped them to deal with the challenges that came from the incorporation

of new habits. Most of the participants were completely new to yoga, so even simple information could represent a difficult task for them (e.g., doing a yoga routine every day or drinking warm water). Apart from the weekly feedback, by the end of the program the students reported having

- better food habits (eating at regular times, having early dinner, avoiding snacking, being conscious about feeling hungry, and avoiding eating when feeling heaviness);
- improved digestion (better elimination, reduced feelings of acidity, less “heaviness” after eating);
- more lightness in the body and in the mind;
- deeper sleep and more feelings of refreshment upon waking up;
- more vitality and willingness to do things;
- more calm and stability; and
- feelings of gratitude.

The entire experience was nurturing for the community and our teachers alike. We can never underestimate the power of small changes in our daily lives. We planted a seed for these members of our community and, with it, all the potency for awakening a healing *pravritti* (yogic path of focus and action in the world). ●



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